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ABSTRACT

Local school boards bear the responsibility for goal-setting, policy-making, hiring, firing, construction, curriculum, and budget allocations. Competent boards need to become and remain informed about emerging, continuing, and future issues. School boards are turning to annual inservice programs to improve their decision-making skills. A sample program is described and ordering information listed for a publication intended for school boards interested in self-evaluation. (MLF)

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Updating SCHOOL BOARD POLICIES

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TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

Boards need education, too!

by Carol MacDougall

You have just been elected to serve on the local school board. In several months you will be expected to vote on whether or not to close a school. You know little about the school's community, students, and staff or the issues prompting the recommendation.

Sound far-fetched? The situation is a reality for many new school board members. A newly elected or appointed representative must be prepared to discuss and cast informed votes on board matters from the moment he or she is sworn in. There is no apprenticeship or mentor system in school board work.

Consider the other extreme. A ten-year veteran of school board service knows his or her constituents and the school system "ropes," but may be less familiar with new or "emerging" issues such as AIDS education, school health clinics, parental leave for school employees, and thematic approaches to curriculum. Yet the veteran board member, too, must be able to cope with emergencies as well as make policy decisions in these areas.

Each school board vote—whether by a newcomer or board old-timer, informed or uninformed—affects the working conditions of school employees and the education of local youth. To improve decision-making, school boards increasingly are turning to annual in-service programs to inform and keep their decision-makers up-to-date on matters of local, state, and national concern.

Orientation is not enough

To achieve educational quality, continuing education for school board members is not only valuable, it's essential. After all, the mere fact of board election/appointment does not mean, within itself, that the person already has the knowledge and background to serve effectively. Regular school board in-service programs can fill that need.

Although most school districts provide for the orientation of new board members, most do not continue with in-service education for the veterans. This has given rise in several state legislatures to the exploration of ways to provide continuing skill development. Kentucky, for example, starting in 1985, required school board members to complete 15 hours of in-service education annually. Several other states, including Texas and South Carolina, have mandated some form of continuing education for board members. Typically these development sessions combine a state curriculum with a local program.

Who teaches the board?

If a local school board makes a commitment to an in-service education program, its planning, design, and execution must be contracted out or assigned to the superintendent. As the top administrative officer of the school district, the superintendent is an obvious choice. However, the close working relationship between the school chief and his or her board can make instruction on some topics difficult. Many in-service programs focus on areas involving the superintendent or staff: good working relationships, delegation of power, effective supervision, and proper limits to the superintendent's authority. Consequently, the superintendent might not be a feasible choice for this role.

Another option is to hire a consultant to organize the seminar. Staff members of the national or state school boards associations may be available for such an assignment—and may have proven to be skilled presentors who are educated and experienced in the planning and running of in-service programs. Consultants can tailor an in-service program to local needs as well as cover the basics of policy, budgets, support services, facilities, and negotiations. School boards can designate a school board member or the superintendent as a keynote speaker, even if a consultant organizes the program. The combination of the professional expertise of a consultant and the knowledge of a local expert may be the best choice for many boards.

Active membership and participation in the national, state, and county school boards associations as well as other educational organizations provide instant access to many resources.

A sample program

The in-service planner should keep in mind the individual school board's strengths and weaknesses, its style of interaction among board members, and the current issues of the local community.

Most board in-service programs will include several of the following topics:

- *Policy Development*. The policy development process is explained, including any relevant state and federal requirements that affect each policy area. The school system's policy manual can be reviewed for accuracy, completeness, and relevancy.
- *Staff Directory*. The names and job descriptions of all current staff—especially the central office administrators—are detailed.

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- *Budgets*. Current budget procedures, with an emphasis on any changes in the budget formation or information gathering process, are discussed.
- *Curriculum*. All levels of the district's curriculum are discussed with an eye towards improvements during the next textbook adoption cycle or the addition of other resource materials. Board members can also consider extra-curricular and special programs.
- *District Goals and Objectives*. Many state legislatures require school boards to identify goals and priorities annually. In-service programs can help boards strengthen their goal-setting process. Ways to examine goals and how to make the best use of the goals once they are adopted are other common concerns.
- *Hiring Procedures*. The district's employment and termination procedures are reviewed. Status reports on minority hiring and the enforcement of equal opportunity laws are included.
- *Non-instructional*. Transportation, food services, and pupil personnel services are considered with an emphasis on problem-solving in each area.
- *Union and Professional Associations*. Board members are informed about all organized labor associations in the district representing school employees and any changes that have occurred in the leadership positions. Changes in negotiation procedures are also discussed.
- *Facilities*. A list of all school buildings, including needed renovation work, is compiled and distributed to board members. New construction as well as needs for additional space are discussed.
- *Staffing*. A list of current staffing levels and future requirements is presented. Staffing is conveniently considered under the categories of elementary, junior/middle, high school, special education, and support personnel.
- *Problems*. In-service forums are ideal for developing different approaches to the school system's most pressing problems. Why and how did the problem develop? Could it have been prevented? What progress is being made?
- *Long-range Planning*. In-service education can also double as strategic planning. The identification of future needs and ways to address them before they become problems can be one of the most important parts of the program's agenda. Annual in-service seminars give continuity and logic to dealing with complex issues, especially the divisive areas of school construction, budget priorities, boundaries, and new curriculums.
- *Chain of Command*. Board in-service forums are a convenient way to remind board members of the clear separation of policy and regulation, including the different responsibilities of the school board and the administration. School board members should not be involved in the daily operation of the school system. New members, in particular, should know that they represent their constituents and contribute to the authority of the board's collective voice, but that they do not speak for the entire board. Board members should follow the district's chain of command when handling community concerns and problems. Board members should refer problems to the appropriate staff member and then follow-up to make sure the problem has been solved.
- *State Legislation/School Board Policy*. The in-service seminar can include a review of new state laws, policies, regulations, and funding sources that impact the local school district.
- *Professional Consultants*. Board members should be kept up-to-date on the consultants, attorneys, contractors, and negotiators currently employed by the school system.
- *Interaction*. In-service education on interaction skills among board members working together as a group focuses on how members respond to questions from citizens and each other, cooperation, whether meetings follow the agenda, and the effect of the administration on board dynamics.

Candidate orientation

An orientation to the new responsibility of serving on the school board should begin as soon as possible. Candidates or prospective nominees for school boards should be encouraged to attend meetings and should participate as citizens in other school-related activities. A first-hand look at school board powers, duties, and procedures is an excellent source of information for any prospective public official.

Superintendents can provide candidates with information about school administration, board procedure, and school programs. Other pre-orientation activity can include:

- dates, times, and agendas for board meetings
- personal meetings with the candidates
- published information on the duties and responsibilities of school boards and board members
- access to current school system policies, regulations, and publications

A word of warning: Current school board members and employees must be politically neutral during the campaign. All candidates should recognize that until elected and sworn into office, their official status is that of citizen. No privileged information should be requested or given.

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